

Best Laid Plans

by Lori C

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Summary: Lee and Amanda's weekend plans get interrupted...again.

1. Part One

>Best Laid Plans...
Chapter 1

>By Lori Cona

>

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the Moon Production Company. The story however, is copyrighted to the author. This

>story is for entertainment purposes only and cannot be redistributed without the
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>
Timeframe: A few months after Lee and Amanda's wedding.

>Synopsis: Lee and Amanda's weekend plans are interrupted...again.

>

>Amanda looked up from her desk as the door to the Q Bureau opened.

"Oh, hi," she said
brightly, leaning back in her chair.

>
Lee meandered over to her desk and casually propped a hip on one corner. "So, anything

>new this morning?" he asked, a half-smile playing across his lips.

>Amanda gazed up at him wryly. "Not yet. What's up? You look like the cat that ate the
canary."

>
"Well, I guess you could say that," he smiled, leaning toward her conspiratorially. "I've

>got plans to spend a whole weekend alone with my wife. Starting tonight. A little cabin
in the Poconos, crackling fire, a nice Cabernet..."

>
Amanda feigned indignation. "Are you telling me you've been married all this time? I

>can't believe I've been carrying on with a married man! That's it, Stetson," she
threatened, standing up and poking one long finger

into his chest. "It's either me or her.

>Time to choose."

>Lee stood up and pulled her close to him, linking his hands behind her back. They smiled
into each other's eyes. "I have to say that I made that choice a long time ago. Or should

>I say I had it made for me?" he murmured, dipping his head to touch her lips with his.

>At the sound of a knock at the door they sprang apart guiltily. "I'm getting too old for
this," Lee muttered, running a hand through his hair. Amanda hid a smile behind her hand

>as he strode to the door and jerked it open. A frustrated frown marred his brow as he
glared at the man waiting patiently in the hallway.

>
Billy stood on the other side of the door, an innocent smile creasing his face. "May I

>come in?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

>Lee stepped back and pulled the door open wider. "Um, sure, Billy, we were just..."

>"Working, yes, I know. I've noticed that you two have had a lot to work on lately," Billy
smiled, coming into the room and facing his two best agents. "And I'm happy to see you

>'working' so well together." Lee and Amanda exchanged abashed glances.

>Lee rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "Yeah, well," he began, "we -"

>Billy held up his hands. "I didn't come here to get into that. We have a minor problem,
and I want you and Amanda to handle it."

>
Amanda snapped to attention. "Yes, sir. What is it?" She moved over to stand beside

>Lee in front of her desk.

>Melrose handed them a thin file. "Lee, do you remember a few years back, a man by the
name of Rhodes? He had his fingers in some pretty nasty pies, but always managed to

>pull them out before we snapped the trap on him."

>Lee skimmed the file thoughtfully, his index finger tapping a grainy black and white
photograph of Raymond Rhodes. "Yeah, now that you mention it, he was slippery. Just

>a two-bit con, wasn't he? I still don't understand how he managed to outsmart some of
the best-trained field agents we had. He didn't come across as all that bright," he said

>derisively. He glanced at Amanda. "This was before you really became involved with the
Agency."

>
Amanda leaned over to look at Rhodes' picture. "What is it that you need us to do, sir?"

>
Billy wandered over to Lee's desk, studying the items littering the surface. As usual,

>everything was in disarray, the complete opposite of Amanda's orderly desktop. His gaze
came to rest on Scarecrow's open day timer and he paused. "Not too much, just some

>casual surveillance. Some things have been popping up here and there, things that seem
to have Rhodes' particular touch. We don't have much to go on." Billy turned to face

>them, beaming. "Should be a snap." He ambled over to the door of the Q Bureau and
opened it, looking back over his shoulder. "Rhodes turned up in the Poconos the day

>before yesterday, and all you two have to do is bring him back here by Sunday night. You
can mix business with pleasure." With that, he slipped out the door, closing it in his

>wake.

>"Billy!" Lee shouted, ripping the door open. "Damn it, Billy, get back here!" Lee turned
back into the office, teeth clenched in frustration and anger. "How does he do that?"

>Every single time we get a chance..." He slammed the door shut again and threw his
hands in the air. "I'm beginning to think he has supernatural powers or something," he

>grumbled, looking over at Amanda helplessly. She stood behind his desk, holding his day
timer in her hands.

>
"This time I think it has something more to do with his powers of observation, Lee. Your

>date book was open and our trip was written in today's space."

Amanda tossed the book
onto the desk and gave an exasperated half-laugh. Their eyes met across the room.

>"Here we go again."

>
End of Chapter One

>

>
Chapter 2

>

>Lee shouldered his garment bag and turned to take Amanda's skis. "Do you need help?"
he inquired solicitously. "We could take this stuff inside the cabin and I'll come back for

>the rest." He smiled at the picture Amanda made in her bright red ski jacket. He had
always loved her in red.

>
"I've got it," Amanda replied, groaning a little under the weight of the combined luggage.

>"How many days are we going to be here...and what do you have in this duffel bag,
anyway? Feels like a ton of bricks," she laughed, trying to straighten up under her load.

>As she shifted the burden she heard suspicious clinking sounds coming from one of Lee's
duffels. Amanda gave him a look, and he grinned sheepishly.

>
"It's only a couple bottles of wine," Lee told her. "I don't care if we are on part-time duty,

>I intend to ply my wife with alcohol and have my way with her," he teased. Reaching the
front door of the cabin, he dropped his left shoulder and let the two pairs of skis slide to

>the deck. After carefully leaning them up against the wall, he reached back to help
Amanda with the extra duffel she had been carrying for him.

>
"Here, Amanda, let me get that. I'll just unlock the door," he said, suiting action to

>words.

>The door swung open and she preceded him inside, dropping the bags in relief. "I think
I'm going to need that wine to get the kinks out of my back, Mr. Stetson," Amanda

>groaned, rolling her shoulders.

>Lee crossed the room to her, shrugging out of his jacket. He came up behind her and
reached around to the front of her parka, slowly pulling down the zipper and nuzzling her

>neck. "Wine might help, Mrs. Stetson," he murmured, tugging the jacket down her arms
and tossing it aside. "But I seem to remember telling you once that I had magic

>fingers..." He nibbled down the side of her throat, causing delightful shivers to race
down her back. He smiled as he felt her tremble.

>
"Something about an indelicate offer from a member of a royal family or something,

>wasn't it?" Amanda groaned softly, eyes closing, as Lee massaged her sore shoulder
muscles. "I've got an indelicate offer for you," she smiled, rubbing her cheek against his

>hand. She heard his deep chuckle from the vicinity of her left ear and slowly opened her
eyes. Directly across the room from them was a mirror that reflected them perfectly.
>What she saw filled her with horror.

>"Lee, watch out!" she screamed, lunging for the safety of the couch.

>He took a rolling dive, coming up on one knee with his gun drawn. "Who are you?" Lee
bit out. "What are you doing here?"
>
The man, who had thrown himself to the ground, covered his head with both arms and
>squawked, "Don't shoot, I'm unarmed! Please!" Peering up at Lee from one eye and
seeing that he was safe for the moment, he whispered fervently, "Thank God it's you! I
>thought I was a goner there for a minute." He slowly sat up, hands raised to show that he
was indeed unarmed.
>
Lee swore under his breath as he lowered his gun. "This has got to be a nightmare." He
>stood and brushed himself off, keeping one eye on the intruder and reaching a hand out to
Amanda who had reappeared from behind the sofa. "Amanda, this is Ray Rhodes. Our
>assignment for the weekend," he grimaced.

>"Well, when Mr. Melrose said it would be an easy assignment, I didn't figure it would be
this easy," Amanda said skeptically. She crossed over to Lee and he wrapped his free
>arm around her.

>"You okay, Amanda?" he asked, settling her against his side.

>"Yeah, fine, just fine. A little confused, though, at what is going on," she said, irritated.

>"I'd like to know the same thing, Rhodes. What are you doing here, and by the way, how
did you get in?" Lee demanded sharply.

>
Rhodes grinned weakly, getting to his feet and dusting off the knees of his worn jeans.
>"You wouldn't want me to incriminate myself, would you, Scarecrow?"

>"Oh, wouldn't I?" Lee replied, raising a brow. "You could just wrap yourself up in a nice
tidy bow of red tape for me so that I could get on with my weekend. I have better things
>to do than deal with lowlifes like you," he finished, disgusted with the situation. He
walked cautiously over to Rhodes, gun raised.
>"Up against the wall and spread 'em,
>Rhodes. You should know the drill by now." Lee patted the man down, found a small
revolver, and thumbed open the chamber. He snorted.
>"Don't you know better than to
>play with guns, Ray? A gun is useless without bullets," Lee griped, tossing the weapon
to Amanda. "Put that somewhere safe, would you, Amanda?"
>
Amanda grimaced and took the firearm into the bedroom, wrapping it in one of the extra
>blankets she found in the closet and pushing it as far back on the top shelf as it would go.
She still hated guns, hated handling them, and most of all, hated the fact that she knew
>how to use one. Shuddering with distaste, she returned to the living area, where she found
their unwanted guest seated on the overstuffed easy chair. He looked quite at home.
>
Lee seated himself on the couch opposite the chair. "So, Ray, we're waiting for some
>answers. Tell me why I have a feeling this wasn't a coincidence," he questioned mildly,
leaning back and spreading his arms along the

back of the couch. Amanda settled herself
>next to Lee, and they locked gazes for an instant, smiling slightly.
His hand dropped to
the nape of her neck and toyed with the soft
brown curls resting there.
>
"I'm really glad it was you they sent after me, Scarecrow," Ray
said with a rakish smile.
>"Anyone else would have shot first and asked questions later.
Speaking of which," he
continued ruefully, rubbing his left upper
arm, "how's that blonde agent - Francine, right?
>- doing these days? Shoot anyone else lately?"

>Lee scowled, tensing. "Look, Ray, I'm starting to lose my patience
here-"

>Ray abandoned his nonchalant air, running both hands through his
curly black hair.
He stood up and paced agitatedly. "I need your
help," he muttered, casting a sideways
>glance at Lee and Amanda.

>Scarecrow looked back in disbelief. "Yeah, right. We're going to
help you right back to
D.C. tomorrow morning. There are some
people who have a few questions for you," he
>added with satisfaction.

>"No," Ray groaned in frustration, "you can't take me back yet. There
are people who
would rather I go back to Washington in a wooden
box, if you get my meaning. I...know
>some things, about some people...Let's just say they're not crazy
about me having the
information, all right?" He sat back down in
the chair heavily. "I know that I'm not
>exactly reliable," he looked up as Lee made a rude noise, "but I
really do need your help.
I'll give you the information I have if
you can guarantee me safe passage to...well,
>wherever I want to go."

>Lee leaned forward, bracing his elbows on widespread knees. "Just
what makes you
think I'd be interested in your information? And
why should I guarantee you anything?"
>he asked reasonably. "It looks to me like I'm holding all the cards.
All I have to do is
take you back to D.C and let you hang
yourself."
>
Ray smiled confidently. "It just so happens that I have one
little ace in the hole. You
>forget, I deal in information, and I happen to have some on the two
of you. So," he
continued, rising from his seat and ambling
toward the darkened window, "we could
>make a trade of sorts." He looked over at the two of them, seeing
the beginning of
understanding dawning on their faces. "Your
guarantee for my silence, MR. and MRS.
>STETSON."

>End of Chapter 2

2. Part Two

Best Laid Plansâ€|
>Chapter 3

>
Lee was up and out of his seat in a flash, two long strides
propelling him across the room
>to where Rhodes stood near the window. He fisted his right hand in
the open collar of
Ray's shirt, slamming the man up against the
wall. "I'll smear your face all over the road
>back to D.C. if you even try," he gritted out between his teeth,
pushing him an inch
higher.
>
Ray struggled, grasping Lee's restraining hand desperately in

both of his. "Hey, let me
>down," he choked, his feet swinging inches above the floor.

>Lee cocked his left fist back. "Better start talking or you're going
to be seeing stars, and
they won't be on the American flag," he
warned. Through the red haze fogging his brain,
>he faintly heard Amanda cautioning him.

>"Lee. Lee!" she said insistently, coming to his side and carefully
placing a compelling
hand on his shoulder.
>
Lee visibly tried to shrug off the fury that had engulfed him.
Still tense, he let Rhodes
>slide down the wall until his feet touched the floor. Ray gasped for
air, running a hand
around his throat gingerly.
>
"All right, Scarecrow. Look, I'll tell you what I know, if you
can help me. Forget I ever
>mentioned your relationship," he entreated. He shot a beleaguered
look at Amanda. "Is
he always this hot under the collar?"

>
Amanda returned his look with a steady gaze. "Usually only when
someone tries to
>blackmail him. I wouldn't push it if I were you," she said
gently.

>Lee took the man's arm a little roughly, dragging him over to the
couch. "Talk, Ray.
And it had better be good," he grumbled,
shoving him down.
>
Rhodes sat up straighter, pulling at his collar indignantly. He
opened his mouth to
>complain at the rough handling, but subsided after a dark look from
Lee.

>Amanda seated herself in the easy chair, Lee perching on the arm. He
crossed his arms in
front of his chest, left foot swinging idly.
He raised one eyebrow at Rhodes, silently
>commanding him to begin.

>Ray tried to regain his self-assurance, but failed miserably. "Okay.
While I was digging
around for information in someâ€|business
transactions, I found out that Senator Hartford
>is doing a little dealing on the side. A country called Estoccia or
something like that." A
look of alarm passed between Lee and
Amanda. "Something to do with small arms," Ray
>finished, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension that had flooded
the room. He sat
back, spreading his arms wide. "That's it. Now,
can you protect me or what? Senators
>have long reaches, you know." Ray fingered his tender throat again.

>Lee sighed heavily. "If you're telling the truth, sure, we'll do
what we can." He ran a tired
hand across the back of his neck.
"Amanda, I need to call Billy, run this by him."
>
She smiled reassuringly up at him. "I'll stay here and keep Ray
company."
>
Lee went into the bedroom, mulling over this new turn of events.
He absently dialed the
>familiar Agency number and asked for Billy. The bedside alarm
clock's glowing LED
numbers informed him of the lateness of the
hour moments before Billy's groggy voice
>came on the line.

>"Scarecrow?" he inquired, glancing over at his sleeping wife. "Don't
you have anything
better to do on a Friday night in the Poconos
than call me?" he quipped. "Don't tell me â€"
>you've found Rhodes."

>Lee grimaced into the receiver. "You could say that," he muttered,

combing his fingers
agitatedly through his already mussed hair.

>
Billy grunted. "I'll send someone up there in the morning to haul him back to D.C. for
>questioning. I wouldn't want to ruin your entire weekend, and the case load is light here
anyway," he remarked, containing a chuckle.

>
Lee paced to the door of the bedroom, staring glumly out at the living room where

>Amanda and Ray sat quietly talking. "Yeah, well, it's too late. Billy, Rhodes has some
big pieces to that small arms puzzle that we've been monitoring. His information points a
>finger at Senator Hartford," he announced, "but there's a wrinkle. It seems the Senator
has been passing the weapons to someone in Estoccia."

>
Billy frowned thoughtfully. "Amanda's ex-husband has been doing some work connected

>with Estoccia for the EAO again. Find out if she knows if he's in D.C. It might be a
good idea to talk to him, find out if he's heard anything. He's pretty tight with the Prime

>Minister there, after that debacle a while back. And, Lee," he murmured regretfully, "I
really am sorry about messing up your weekend. Once this is cleared up I'll take you

>andâ€|you off the duty roster for a long weekend, okay?"

>Lee laughed ruefully. "Yeah, sure. Thanks, Billy. Oh, and don't bother sending anyone
up here tomorrow. We'll be coming back to D.C., so we'll deliver our little package

>ourselves. I'd rather not have to baby-sit Rhodes in this cabin all night." He dropped the
receiver into its cradle with a sharp click and ran his hand over the quilted bedspread.

>'Bad timing again', he thought with a wry shake of his head. 'We're becoming pros at bad
timing.' He turned and made his way back into the living room.

>
Amanda looked up inquiringly as he entered. "What did Mr. Melrose have to say?" she

>asked, crossing the room and taking his hand. Lee glanced over her shoulder at Ray, who
seemed absorbed in some old program blaring from the television set.

>
He looked down at her hand in his, absently running his thumb over the backs of her

>fingers. "Amanda â€" "

>"I know, I know. It's a good thing we haven't unpacked anything yet. I guess we'd better
load up the car," she groused good-naturedly, turning to gather up her things.

>
Lee didn't relinquish her hand. "That's not all, Amanda." She kept her eyes on their

>joined hands. "Do you know where Joe is? We need to talk to him, find out if he knows
anything at all. He has contacts in Estoccia; he's friendly with the Prime Minister. He

>may have information that could help us out." Lee tipped her chin up with a gentle
finger, forcing her to meet his gaze. He saw the worry in her beautiful brown eyes before

>she shut them tightly. "Hey, it'll be okay. I'm sorry about the weekend. Billy does want
us to go back tonight, and anyway, I'll feel better when he's in cold storage," he griped,

>indicating Rhodes with a jerk of his head.

>Amanda took a deep breath. "Joe has been back in town for a few weeks. He has the
boys this weekend. I think he and Carrie were going to take them to the movies. That

>old dinosaur film they love is playing at the theater on

Massachusetts Avenue. Should I
call him?" she asked, her unease evident in her subdued expression.

>
Lee shook his head, no. "It's late, and there's no reason to disturb them tonight.

>Tomorrow will be soon enough." He enfolded her gently in his arms, resting his cheek
against her hair. "We'd better get going, it's going to be close to dawn by the time we get

>home." Amanda hugged him back and nodded wordlessly.

>Lee moved away from the embrace, touching his fingertip lightly to the end of her nose.
He turned and stalked over to Rhodes, who was sprawled half-doing on the couch. He

>clapped him on the shoulder and smirked. "Up and at 'em, Ray, we're going on a road
trip!"

>
End Chapter 3 â€|

>
Chapter 4

>
Amanda slowly opened her eyes and studied her reflection in the darkened passenger

>window of the car. She rolled her head to look at Lee, admiring the strength evident in his
long fingers as they lay casually on the steering wheel. His face wore a mask of intense

>concentration, eyes flicking occasionally to the rear view mirror.

He seemed to feel her
eyes on him, and his dimple slowly

appeared, the tiny laugh lines around his eyes

>becoming visible in the faint gleam of the dashboard lights.

>"Hey, sleepyhead," he murmured softly, finally glancing over at her.

"What were you
dreaming about?" He reached out and touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers in

>a tender caress.

>Amanda peeked over her shoulder at the lone occupant of the backseat, who lay slumped
in one corner, apparently dead to the world. She roused herself enough to straighten up

>slightly, capturing Lee's hand and turning it to plant a kiss in the palm.

>"Oh, I don't know," she replied, her voice husky with sleep.

"Bargain hunting at the
grocery store, that kind of thing," she teased.

>
Lee lowered his voice suggestively. "That's not what it sounded like from over here," he

>murmured smoothly, casting a sideways glance at her. "Unless you have a thing for the
bag boy at the supermarket?"

>
Amanda stared at him open-mouthed, a blush spreading slowly up her face. Had her

>dreams of him caused her to...she caught his impish grin and realized his ploy just in
time. "You mean Fred? Well, he doesn't know I've remarried, and he really is kinda

>cute. He even takes my cart out to the car for me, and he doesn't have to, you know."

>Lee took his attention off the road in surprise. "Fred? Who's Fred?" he asked sharply,
trying to discern her expression in the dim light. Amanda's face was turned away from

>him, her hand over her mouth. "Amanda?" he queried, becoming concerned. Gradually
he became aware of a muffled sound, something like sobbingâ€|or laughing. She was

>LAUGHING at him!

>As she turned to face him, he saw the twinkle in her eyes as she tried to control her
giggles. He rolled his eyes and sighed in disgust. "Okay, okay, you win! Guess I should

>have known better, huh?"

>Amanda laughed outright at that. "Uh-huh. You had me going there for

a minute, so
we're even." She looked out at the passing scenery, noting that the sky seemed to have
>lightened somewhat. "How long have I been asleep?"

>Lee shrugged. "Both you and our friend back there went out like a light before we hit the
interstate." He took her hand and wove their fingers together. "You're beautiful when
>you sleep, do you know that?" he said solemnly. "Sometimes I can't believe that for the
rest of our lives, I have the right to watch you sleep." Suddenly embarrassed by his
>words, he fixed his eyes on the road ahead and cleared his throat.

>Amanda squeezed his fingers. "Oh, wow, that's better than old Fred could do," she said in
mock admiration, trying to lighten the atmosphere. She knew how uncomfortable Lee
>got when he let his sensitive side show. "I love you too, Sweetheart," she asserted gently.

>A loud snort from the back seat intruded on the intimate silence that followed. "Yeah,
yeah. Look, where the hell are we? What hotel are you going to hide me in, Scarecrow?
>I'm an important informant, you have to make sure I'm safe. Maybe Mrs. Stetson here
can baby-sit me," he grinned cheekily, his self-confidence apparently rejuvenated.
>
Lee and Amanda exchanged knowing glances. "No problem, Ray. You'll have the best
>accommodations the Agency has to offer. And some charming company to boot. I
guarantee it," Lee said with a droll smile.
>
The sky was brightening with pre-dawn light when they pulled into the Agency parking
>lot. They had remained silent for the rest of the trip, each lapsing into their own private
thoughts.
>
As Lee parked the car, Ray stirred and looked around him. "Hey, what hotel is this? I
>don't recognize this place," he questioned sharply, leaning forward between the seats.

>Amanda patted the hand that was braced on her seat. "Don't worry, Ray. We have to stop
here to debrief you first. You'll be safe, no one will be able to get to you where you're
>going," she said reassuringly. Her gaze connected with Lee's across the hood of the car
as they got out, and he dipped his head, hiding his amusement.
>
"Come on, Rhodes, let's get you taken care of." Lee took the other man's arm and led
>him into the building.

>Lee leaned in close to his wife. "Amanda, go find Billy and Francine and fill them in. I
know they're here, their cars are in the parking lot," Lee whispered. "Send Francine
>down and I'll have her baby sit for our stool pigeon." He caught Amanda's startled glance
and smiled innocently. "What? You and I have other fish to fry. Besides, Francine's got
>a history with this guy. Remind me to tell you later. I'll be waiting down in the holding
cell."
>
Amanda walked quickly through the deserted bullpen to Billy's office. She peeked
>through the window as she knocked, and entered as he waved her in.

>"Good morning, Sir, Francine," she said cheerfully, stepping inside and closing the door
gently behind her.
>
"Well, well, Amanda," Francine began snidely, "isn't it a coincidence how you just
>happened to be available this weekend for the Poconos assignment?"

She rested one hip
against Billy's desk and crossed her arms. "I can imagine what it was like: snug little >cottage, fire blazing...but then I guess Ray Rhodes turned up like a bad penny," she
sighed, feigning regret. >
"Can it, Francine," Amanda said wearily. >
"Good morning, Amanda," Billy returned, amused. "What's the status of our guest?" he >asked, placing his untouched doughnut on the napkin in front of him and folding his
hands. >
"Well, Sir, he's down in one of the holding cells with Lee. I think Lee has an assignment >for you, Francine. He said something about it being top priority," she improvised
ingeniously. "He's waiting for you," Amanda prodded, biting the inside of her lip to keep >from smiling.
>"Oh, well, Amanda, you can't win them all. There's still some jobs that only an
experienced operative can handle," she stated smugly, sailing out of the office. >
Billy laughed as he stood up. "I get the feeling she isn't going to like this assignment >much," he said, holding open the door for Amanda to precede him.

>"No, Sir," she agreed. She paused uncomfortably. "I'll call Joe and see if I can go talk to
him this morning. I'd rather do this alone, if it's okay," she requested, glancing down at >her knotted hands. "Lee and Joe aren't particularly at ease with each other, and "
>Billy ushered her back through the bullpen. "Go right ahead, Amanda, this is one area
where you'll do better alone." >
Amanda unlocked the door to the Q Bureau and surveyed her tidy desk, strangely >unwilling to pick up the phone. She couldn't believe that she had to involve Joe in this
part of her life again. She sighed heavily, seating herself and lifting the receiver. >Everyone had to do things that they didn't want to do, she reminded herself. She thought
of Francine's inevitable reaction when Lee told her the nature of her assignment and >grinned. Momentarily cheered, she punched in the number of Joe's apartment. Smiling
inwardly, she thought, 'Well, Francine, what goes around, comes around'. >
End Chapter 4

>
>Chapter 5
>Francine's reaction was exactly what Amanda had expected: total outrage. She paced
outside Rhodes' holding cell in agitation, her blue eyes shooting daggers at Lee as he >leaned casually against the wall, his hands deep in his jacket pockets. "Why me? I don't
understand this! Amanda has met him, he's probably already comfortable with her "
>besides, I'm sure I have more important things to do->
>Lee raised both hands in the air. "Keep it down, Francine. Look, it's just the way things
worked out." He turned his palms upward and shrugged. "Amanda's job is to get in touch >with her ex, and you were here and available. Billy will clear your agenda for the next
few days, so there's nothing that needs your immediate attention." He cleared his throat >and looked away, fingering the collar of his open jacket. "Incidentally, um " he knows
you, too." >
"What-" Francine began, stepping through the door as Lee pulled it open. The man

>inside turned toward the door, grabbed his upper arm and backed away in defense as he
saw who had entered. "YOU!" they shouted simultaneously.

>
Francine threw a pleading glance over her shoulder at Lee as he quickly sidled out the

>door, closing it with a snap. "Sorry," he mouthed through the thick glass of the window,
shaking his head at the mutinous set of her jaw. He ran a hand through his hair,

>hightailing it down the hall to the relative safety of the elevator. He got out at the
Georgetown entrance, passing Mrs. Marsden's empty office, and took the steps to the >second floor two at a time. He grinned to himself, anticipating Amanda's enjoyment of
the predicament Francine had found herself in.

>
Lee entered the Q Bureau quietly, raising his eyebrows at Amanda as she sat talking on

>the phone with Joe. She glanced up at him, her welcoming smile doing little to alleviate
the faint worry lines etched in her forehead. Lee took up his usual position on the edge of

>her desk, waiting patiently for her to finish her call.

>"Okay, Joe. I'll just run home and get cleaned up a bit, and I'll meet you at the apartment
at about ten. Oh, sure, I'd love to meet her. Yes, I'm sure I'll like her. The boys will

>really enjoy that. Okay, bye," she concluded, placing the receiver carefully back in its
cradle. She folded her hands on her desk and caught Lee's concerned expression. "I

>guess you heard, I'm meeting him at ten," she began, her fingers absently toying with the
heart-shaped necklace suspended around her throat.

>
"Ten o'clock is good. That gives me plenty of time to run over to my place and clean up

>too, then pick you up at your house. I'll driveâ€|" He paused at the look on her face.

>"Lee, I need to do this alone," Amanda said regretfully. She stood up and placed her
hands comfortingly on his chest, lightly smoothing the material of his shirt. "I know that

>you would rather be there with me, but both you and Joe get so uncomfortable when
you're together that he might not tell me everything."

>
Lee lowered his eyes, tacitly acknowledging the truth of her statement. He grasped her

>elbows and ran his hands up her arms warily. "Amanda, I â€""

>Amanda gently placed a finger over his lips, stemming the flow of words. "I know. It's
okay. Why don't you go home and get a little rest? You didn't sleep at all last night. At

>least I got to sleep in the car. I'll call you as soon as I've talked to Joe, all right? Hey,"
she chided, tipping his chin up with her finger, "How about dinner tonight at your place?

>I'll stop by the grocery store and pick up some steaks."

>Lee kissed her playfully. "Just as long as old Fred the bag boy doesn't follow you home!"
he laughed, taking her shoulders and turning her around. "Come on, I'll drive you home."

>
End Chapter 5

>

Chapter 6

>
Amanda pulled up outside of Joe's apartment just before ten o'clock. She sat for a moment to gather her thoughts, then stepped out of the car and made her way up the walk
to the front entrance of the building. As she was about to enter, she heard a call from up the street and turned to look.
>"Hey, Mom," Jamie cried, racing up to her. Philip followed more sedately behind, as
befitted his stature as older brother. Amanda admired her sons, marveling at how much they had grown in so short a time. She met Jamie with a hug and a kiss on top of his
head, and Philip with a more casual, "Hey, Pal," and a smile. "What are you two doing out front?"
>"Dad's parking the car, and we're bringing in the grocery bags!" Jamie chirped brightly,
shifting the paper bag in his arms. "Philip, get the door!" he shouted to his brother.>
"Chill out, monkey breath," muttered Philip, rolling his eyes as he pushed open the heavy door.
>"Philip, don't call your brother monkey breath," Amanda scolded. She followed them up
the stairs to Joe's apartment and took Philip's bag from him while he unlocked the door.>
As they entered the apartment, Amanda heard Joe's voice drifting up the stairwell.>"Amanda, is that you?" He appeared around the railing and bounded up the last few
stairs. He grabbed her shoulders anxiously. "Amanda. What's wrong? You really had me worried, calling so early this morning."
>"Let's go inside, it won't take long. I'll explain everything," Amanda soothed. "By the
way, where's Carrie? Didn't you say she was going to take the boys to the movies so we could talk?" Amanda gazed around the room searchingly.
>"She's just finishing up getting ready. She won't be out for a while yet," Joe replied with
a long-suffering sigh. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "She takes twice as long to get ready as you ever did," he said, shrugging. Amanda smiled in commiseration
as he led her to the sofa. "Come here and have a seat. You look a little tired. Are you sure you're okay?" he asked, a frown knitting his brow.
>They sat down on the couch, and Amanda took his hand, speaking in hushed tones. "Joe,
something has come up at the Agency. I can't really tell you too much," they shared a secretive smile, "but it has to do with Estoccia again. I can tell you that there is a senator
who's been, well, smuggling certain things to someone there. We need to find the go-between. It's got to be someone who looks squeaky clean on the surface, because we
haven't even got a clue." She sighed and sat back against the cushions. "I feel like I'm on a wild goose chase. I know you don't have anything to do with it, butâ€¦" she glanced
over at him apologetically.>"Amanda, you're just doing your job. Let me thinkâ€¦" Joe went over to the window and
pulled back the curtain, lost in thought. He stared absently at a dark blue sedan parked across the street. "I'll have to dig around a bit, and I'll check with the Prime Minister, but
it's going to take some time," he shrugged doubtfully, turning to face her. "I'll do what I can. Are you authorized to tell me the senator's name?" he asked hesitantly, searching
her face.>
Amanda stood slowly, a contrite smile pulling at the corners of

her mouth. "Joe-"

>
"Oh hi!" gushed a cheery voice, accompanied by a petite blond woman dressed casually

>in form-fitting jeans and a pink sweater. "You must be Amanda! It's so nice to finally
meet you! I'm Carrie Stockton, Joe's fianc e. Let me get Philip and Jamie and we'll be

>out of your hair!" She breezed back out of the room and Amanda heard her calling for
the boys.

>
Amanda exchanged a discomfited look with Joe and gave a half-laugh, looking down at

>her meshed fingers. "I guess that was Carrie."

>Joe tried to cover his embarrassment with a cough. "She gets a little excitable
sometimes," he said, grimacing.

>
Amanda could see he was having trouble meeting her eyes. "Joe, don't worry about it.

>I'm sure she's  very nice." She took a deep breath and turned to the door. "Well, that's
really all I wanted to talk to you about," Amanda said, tucking her hands in her skirt

>pockets self-consciously. "I guess I just need you to nose around a little, see what turns
up. I'm going to head back to the office."

Joe opened the door and stepped out into the

>hall with her. At the top of the stairs she paused and looked back at him with her hand on
the railing. "Call me if you find out anything, okay? And I am sorry that I had to involve

>you again," she said remorsefully.

>Joe nodded slightly, and lifted a hand in farewell. Amanda continued down the steps,
murmuring testily under her breath, "Excitable, huh? I can only imagine "

>herself out the main entrance to the building and crossed to her car. She opened the door
and slid in, deftly pulling out of the parking space and merging with traffic.

>
Across the street the men in the blue sedan watched. "Should we follow her?" asked the

>thin, balding man in the driver's seat.

>His partner blew out a stream of cigarette smoke and smiled sardonically. "The tracking
device I put under her car will take care of that. Plus, it's equipped with a little 'insurance

>policy'," he said smugly. "We have to meet with our contact  should be any time now."
He flicked his cigarette but out the window.

"We've covered our tracks too well for them

>to have any details on our operation. The King woman was probably just snooping
around. But just in case," he smiled wickedly, "we'll know where to find her."

>
End chapter 6

>

>Chapter 7

>Amanda pulled into the Agency parking lot, a troubled frown on her face. Something
was bothering her and she couldn't put her finger on it. She entered the building, smiled

>absently at Mrs. Marsden, and headed up the steps for the Q-Bureau.

She collided with
Lee at the top of the stairs, nearly losing her balance before he caught her.

>
"Hey, Amanda! What's got you so distracted?" he laughed, steadying her with his hands

>on her arms. "Are you just getting back?" Lee walked beside her to the door of the Q
Bureau, his hand in the small of her back.

>
Amanda preceded him into the office, dropping her purse and keys on her desk and

>settling into her chair. She leaned forward with her elbows on her desk, cupping her chin
in one hand thoughtfully. Lee followed her in, shutting the door quietly behind him, and
>turned to look at her expectantly. When she didn't acknowledge him in any way, his
smile turned speculative.
>
"Amanda? Did you find anything out?" Lee queried.
>
She looked up at him and shook off her preoccupation. "I'm sorry, Lee, I was a million
>miles away." She covered her mouth with both hands and shook her head. "I feel like
I'm missing something. Something very obvious." Suddenly a thought occurred to her,
>and she turned to Lee abruptly. "Are there any pictures of Senator Hartford in the
Agency files?"
>
He looked startled for a moment. "Sure, the man's a public figure. I'm sure there's a ton
>of photos." He looked closely at her. "Do you think you have something?"

>Amanda sprang to her feet. "I'm not sure, but I need to look at those pictures. Anything
where he was in a crowd, lots of people around him." She strode quickly to the door,
>paused and turned back to where Lee stood, bemused. "Well, are you coming?" she
asked impatiently.
>
Lee nodded. "I wouldn't miss one of your infamous leaps of intuition for the world," he
>chuckled, dimples flashing. "By all means!"

>Down in the photo file room, they paged through hundreds of pictures of the senator at
banquets, rallies, and charity events. They had been searching for over an hour when
>Amanda suddenly straightened in her chair. "Lee-"

>He roused himself from his semi-stupor and leaned over her shoulder to see the screen,
rubbing a hand over his face. "You've got something?"
>
Amanda was staring fixedly at a photograph of Senator Hartford and his wife Marianne.
>They were surrounded by a group of people, obviously attending a funeral. A young
woman stood near the senator, one hand on his arm, the other gripping a handkerchief.
>"Lee, who is that woman, on the left," Amanda said in a near-whisper.

>"That's his current wife, Marianne," he told her. He looked more closely. "This looks like
the picture from his ex-wife's funeral."
>
"No, no," Amanda said, shaken. "The senator's left. The blonde."

>
Lee looked at Amanda, bewildered. "That's his daughter from his first marriage, Carrie
>Stockton. I met her a couple of years back at a reception."

>Amanda's eyes widened as realization dawned. "Oh my gosh!"

>End Chapter 7

4. Part Four

Best Laid Plans

>Chapter 8

>Carrie came back into the living room and stopped abruptly, looking around. "Oh, did
Amanda leave already? I told you I'd take the kids to the movies so that you could talk,"

>she pouted, venturing further into the room. Her fianc  stood with one hand on the
closed apartment door, immersed in his thoughts. "Honey?" she prodded, going to him
>and laying a hand on his back.

>Joe jumped slightly, startled. He gave her a half-smile and turned back into the room.
"Amanda left, she only had a couple of questions for me |about the boys' summer
>vacation plans," he improvised. "You don't have to go to the movies. Let's all do
something together," he proposed.
>
Carrie narrowed her eyes slightly. "Come on, I've made plans to take the kids, now you'll
>just have to join us." She rolled her eyes exaggeratedly and lowered her voice to a stage
whisper. "Why should you be spared the 'Revenge of T-Rex!' I swear I don't know
>where they got their love of old dinosaur movies. Let's go," she wheedled.

>Joe laughed and took her hand. "If you're sure |"

>Carrie brightened and called out to Philip and Jamie. "All right, troops, your dad's
coming with us to the movies! We gotta move if we want to get popcorn! The show
>starts at 11:30, and it's always a pain to find parking." The brothers charged into the
room and out the front door, whooping and hollering. Joe and Carrie followed more
>slowly, and at the main entrance he held the door for her.

>Carrie glanced across the street to the where the blue sedan lay in wait. Nodding almost
imperceptibly, she put on her sunglasses and held out her hand to Joe. "Let's take my car,
>the kids really love to ride in it," she offered with a smile.

>"That's it," snapped the man in the driver's seat. "She wants us to trail her," he
commented as he turned the key in the ignition. His partner remained silent, eyes
>narrowed as he watched the little family tableau.

>Finally he nodded. "Let's go," he said abruptly, flicking yet another cigarette butt out the
window. They waited until they saw Carrie's familiar red sports car pull out into the
>street, then allowed a couple of vehicles to come between them before following.

>After a short drive the theater came into view and the sports car pulled to the side,
allowing Joe King and his sons to alight. They watched as Joe ducked his head into the
>passenger window momentarily, then step back as the car began to inch forward. It
pulled back out into traffic and sped up, taking the first right turn. As they trailed the car,
>the stocky man in the passenger seat caught a glimpse of King as he stood in the ticket
line. They passed the theater and turned right at the next block, coming to rest behind
>Carrie's car. The two men exchanged looks, and the passenger casually lit a cigarette.
"Rogers, stay in the car. I'll be right back," he ordered, swinging the door open and
>stepping out.

>He walked nonchalantly over to the sports car and got in the passenger side. As he
settled into the seat, he turned to Carrie and blew a cloud of smoke in her direction.
>
Carrie shot him a withering look. "I don't have much time here, Barrett. I overheard Joe
>and his ex-wife discussing the arms deal. She must be working for the Agency  " they've
been sniffing around for months. They don't have much to go on, but I'm pretty sure they

>know my father is involved. They must have caught that idiot, Rhodes. Possibly he went
to them for help," she muttered in disgust. "I'll tell you one thing, this has got to end soon. I can't take pretending to be the Happy Homemaker for much longer. I'm going to
die of terminal perkiness. The only kind of stepmother I'll ever be is the evil fairy tale variety." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel impatiently. "Do you have any
information for me?">
Barrett shrugged. "We just need a few more days at the most. The deal is almost done, >the last of the weapons are going to be delivered with the next shipment from the EAO.
Tuesday, I think. Just keep our boy in there happy until then," he smirked, jerking his >head toward the movie house. "After that, he's expendable."

>Carrie frowned thoughtfully. "What about his ex? If they have Rhodes "
>Barrett cut her off. "Rhodes doesn't know any details. If they are protecting him, they
must think that he knows more than he's telling. He's not a danger to us. However, Mrs. >King could be trouble if she stirs up Joe's patriotic nature. He can't find out that you are
using him, Carrie." He gave her a dangerous look. "If you think he is becoming >suspicious, he has to be dealt with. Permanently."
>"Okay, okay." Carrie glanced in the rear view mirror and adjusted her sunglasses. "I'd
better get back to being Susie Homemaker before they wonder what happened to me," >she grimaced, getting out of the car. "I'll be in touch." She ran lightly around the front of
her car up onto the sidewalk and disappeared around the corner. >
Barrett waited a few moments, then leisurely stepped out of the vehicle, adjusting his >jacket as he returned the blue sedan. He ground out his cigarette with the toe of his
polished oxford, and got in the car. "I have a feeling we're going to have a problem with >our dear Ms. Stockton," he drawled, keeping his eyes forward. "She doesn't seem to have
the guts for this job. Oh, and we'll have to keep an eye on Joe King as well. Anything >out of the ordinary and he has to be taken out of the picture."

>Rogers grunted in assent and started the car. "I got a call from the boss. They traced Mrs.
King's car to the parking lot of IFF, some government film company." >
Barrett chuckled, drawing a surprised look from his partner. "IFF is only a front for the >Agency. I guess Mrs. King just made the hit list."
>End chapter 8
>Chapter 9
>
Lee leaned forward, bracing his hands on Amanda's desk. "You've got to be kidding me. >Joe's fianc e is Carrie Stockton? It can't be a coincidence. They must be using Joe's
connection with the EOA to ship those weapons to Estocchia. Joe sure knows how to pick >'em." He turned abruptly and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and
index finger in vexation. "I can't believe we've been spinning our wheels over this for >months and she's been right under our noses." He spun back to face his wife, realizing
that she had been uncharacteristically silent. "Amanda?" >
She looked up at him, eyes shadowed with fear. "Lee, they |they

have the boys. That

>woman has my boys!" She quickly slung her purse over her shoulder and made her way
around the desk, her face filled with determination.

>
Lee grabbed her arm as she passed by and tried to restrain her. "Amanda, where do you

>think you're going?" he asked sternly, struggling to keep her from escaping.

>She shot him a scorching look. "She has my children, Lee. I'm going to get them and
make sure they're safe," she snapped. "Let go of me or you'll find out just how well I've

>been paying attention in 'Dr. Pain's' martial arts class, Stetson."

>Lee dropped his hand and backed off slightly. "Amanda, they're probably safe. Carrie
doesn't suspect anything, so why would she hurt Philip and Jamie?" He saw her set face

>and realized that he wasn't going to get anywhere with that argument. "All right, look,"
he said reassuringly, "you can't do this alone. I'm going with you," he declared firmly,

>taking her elbow and escorting her out of the office. He had to lengthen his stride to keep
up with her hurried steps.

>
Amanda kept her gaze resolutely forward. "Fine."

>
"We should get back-up," Lee lectured, trying to slow her progress. "The Agency

>manual says â€""

>Amanda laughed incredulously, cutting him off. "Oh boy, if that's not a case of the devil
quoting scripture! Since when do you follow Agency rules?" She came to abrupt halt at

>the foot of the stairs, looking up at him where he stood on the first step. "Look, I'm going
to get my boys, with or without you, with or without back-up," she told him firmly. "Do

>what you want." With that, she breezed through Mrs. Marsden's office and out the front
door.

>
Lee looked after her in astonishment. Rarely had he ever seen Amanda act with such

>calm deliberation. He felt a moment of disquiet, reflecting that she didn't rely on him to
bail her out of scrapes like she used to.

She had come a long way. He was galvanized

>into action when the door to the elevatorcloset opened and Billy appeared.

>
"Lee, there you are. What on earth did you do to Francine?" he smirked. "It sounds like

>the clash of the Titans down in that holding cell. I was planning on talking to Rhodes
myself, butâ€|" He gave an exaggerated shudder and laughed. "I think I'll keep my

>distance."

>Lee grabbed Billy's shoulders tensely. "I can't go into too much detail right now, but
we've found the link between Senator Hartford and those arms dealers in Estoccia. His

>daughter, Carrie Stockton, is Joe King's fiancÃ©e. Amanda's sons are spending the
weekend with Joe and Carrie, and Amanda just flew out of here to pick them up." He

>sent an agonized glance toward Billy and started for the door. "They were at the movie
theater on Massachusetts Avenue not that long ago. Get me some back up and meet me

>there, I'm going after Amanda." He nearly tore the door off its hinges as he raced through
it, leaving the bewildered section chief in his wake.

>
Smiling innocently at Mrs. Marsden, Billy picked up her phone

and punched in a few
>numbers. "Francine," he barked, "leave a guard at the door of the
holding cell and
assemble a backup team, ASAP. We've got a
problemâ€|"
>

>End of Chapter 9

>

>Best Laid Plansâ€|
Chapter 10
>

>Lee burst through the door, cursing as Amanda's car careened out of
the Agency parking
lot, its tires squealing. He made an abortive
attempt to chase her down on foot, then
>checked himself, backtracking to his Corvette parked on the street.
With short, angry
movements he let himself into his car and
peeled away from the sidewalk, narrowly
>missing an oncoming blue sedan. He knew that he had to prevent
Amanda from getting to
the theater before him. In her state of
mind, she could blow the whole operation, and
>endanger her sons even more.

>After several minutes, he noticed that the blue sedan was still
behind him. He watched
with a frown as it trailed him through
several turns. He considered trying to lose the tail,
>but he wasn't sure if it was following him or Amandaâ€|he was only a
couple of cars
behind her now.
>
As luck would have it, Amanda found a parking space in the alley
right next to the
>theater. Lee parked illegally next to a fire hydrant a few car
lengths past her and sprinted
up the sidewalk to intercept her.
"Amanda, wait!" he called anxiously. She either didn't
>hear him or just wouldn't acknowledge him.

>*****
The blue car pulled up and parked across the street
from the theater. Inside, Rogers and
>Barrett were having an argument of their own.

>"I say we should take her down now, Barrett," Rogers said
eagerly.

>His partner looked at him with disgust. "Patience, Rogers. Wait and
see. I have a
feeling that we'll be able to kill several birds
with one stone." Barrett absently ran his
>thumb over the small black remote control in his hand. "All we have
to do is wait until
she gets Mr. King back to her car," he
admonished. "We can take care of Ms. Stockton
>separately." Barrett tapped his cigarette into the overflowing
ashtray and watched intently
as a man ran up to Amanda and
grabbed her arm. "That's the guy in the silver 'vette that
>almost ran us off the road in front of the Agency."

>The two men watched the ensuing struggle as Mrs. King tried in vain
to elude the other
agent.
>

>Lee shook his finger furiously in Amanda's face. "You are not doing
this alone, Amanda
Stetson! Billy will be here with backup any
minute," he shouted, his face reddening.
>
The look she sent him would have blistered the hide off of a
less determined man. She
>wrenched her arm out of his grasp and swept through the door of the
theater, Lee hot on
her heels.
>
The dinosaur movie was just letting out, and Amanda found
herself surrounded by the
>light-hearted crowd that surged from the depths of the theater. She
scanned the faces
anxiously, finally coming to rest on Joe and
the boys. Carrie was nowhere to be seen.

>
"Joe!" she called urgently, waving an arm over her head. Lee appeared at her side and
>took her other elbow none too gently. Amanda gave him a pointed look, then turned her
attention back to her sons as they ran up.

>
Joe looked at her inquiringly, a puzzled smile on his face. "Amanda, what are you doing
>here?" he queried. He nodded in Lee's general direction. She cast her gaze furtively
around the foyer. "Joe, where's Carrie? I need to talk to you, alone." She reached out
>and grabbed his hand in a fierce grip.
>"She went to the ladies' room as soon as the credits came up," he explained. "We're
supposed to meet her out here."
>
Amanda closed her eyes in relief. "I can't go into details right now, but we need to get
>out of here. My car is right around the corner," she said, gathering the boys close to her
sides.
>
Lee locked gazes with Joe for a moment, shaking his head slightly. "We'll explain
>everything in the car." He shepherded the little group to the front entrance and stopped
abruptly as he caught sight of the car waiting on the opposite side of the street. "Wait a
>minute," he began. He stepped close to Amanda and whispered urgently, "Not this way.
That blue car across the street tailed us here. There has to be another exit," he said
>tensely, laying his hand in the small of her back.
>Amanda spotted an exit sign toward the rear of the foyer. "Over there," she yelled, taking
her sons by the hand and struggling against the tide of movie-goers. Joe followed in their
>wake with Lee right behind him.
>*****
Barrett cursed and flung open his door. "They've spotted us! Come on, we can't lose
>themâ€|they may not take her car," he said, scrambling out and darting across the street,
Rogers close on his heels. Horns blared as several cars swerved to miss them. As they
>gained the sidewalk and approached the door to the theater, Barrett nodded to Rogers and
drew his weapon, keeping it hidden inside his jacket.
>

>Lee had just caught sight of two suited men entering through the large glass front doors
of the building when Amanda's cry diverted his attention. "Lee! It's Carrie!" she shouted
>hoarsely, breaking into a run and dragging Philip and Jamie with her. He saw the look
that passed between Joe's fiancÃ©e and the two men as they gave chase.
>
They hit the exit and burst through into the bright sunlight. "My car is right over there,"
>Amanda said breathlessly, heading for the curb, the boys and Joe behind her.

>Lee came through the exit and flattened himself against the exterior wall, drawing his
gun. His jaw tightened as he heard shouts from within and the pounding of several pairs
>of feet approaching. The door flew open and the two pursuers rushed out, scanning the
alley for their quarry. Lee whirled toward them and lashed out with his foot, disarming
>the man closest to him. The other attacker brought his weapon up. Lee knocked his arm
aside, driving his right fist into the man's stomach and following up with a left to his jaw.
>The assailant dropped to the ground with a thud, unmoving.

>The first man took a swing and missed as Lee ducked. Lee retaliated with a blow to the
man's midsection, which was diverted and countered by a jab to the agent's face. Lee's head snapped to the side with the impact, and he tasted blood on his lip. Clenching his
teeth, he drew back his left fist and let it fly, sending the man spinning to the ground, >unconscious.
>Lee ran the back of his hand across his split lip, glancing up to locate his wife. She stood
on the sidewalk near the car, Philip and Jamie clutched tightly to her side. Joe had taken >her keys and was headed around the front of the car to the driver's side.
>Suddenly, Amanda's eyes widened. "Lee, look out!" she shouted.

>Lee spun back to the two prone attackers. One was struggling to get to his knees, weakly
attempting to thumb the switch on a small black control box in his hand. "Amanda, get >DOWN!" Lee yelled harshly, diving for the cover of the dumpsters nearby. She pulled
her sons down into the stairwell of the adjacent building, stumbling down the last few >steps as an explosion rent the air.
>Dazed, Lee shoved the dumpster aside and looked out at the burning remains of
Amanda's car. He pushed himself up and cautiously approached the flames, waving >Amanda back as she emerged from her hiding place.
>"Lee," she whispered fearfully, "Joe was on the other side of the car."

>Lee cautioned her to stay back. "I'll take a look. Don't come any closer," he told her
firmly, not wanting her to witness whatever scene lay in the street. He slowly rounded the >back of the car and found Joe sprawled on his back, inert. He glanced at Amanda and
tried to smile reassuringly. Lee went to Joe and felt for a pulse, feeling weak with relief >when it beat strongly under his fingers.
>He stood up and called to Amanda. "He's still alive, but he's out cold. The blast threw
him nearly across the street, and he probably banged his head against the pavement. Go >inside and call 911," he instructed, "I'll take care of the two goons out here." He knelt
next to them and began to cuff their hands.

>
Amanda nodded, telling her sons to stay put. When she opened the emergency exit door, >she came face to face with the barrel of a Smith and Wesson pistol.

>"The party isn't over yet, Mrs. King," Carrie smirked. "Back outside," she said,
motioning with the gun. Amanda closed her eyes grimly and backed out of the doorway. >Carrie followed her out, keeping the gun trained on her. "Well, well, Mr. Stetson," she
called in a sing-song voice. "I see that they were no match for you," she said >disdainfully, prodding Barrett with one toe. "Good help is so hard to find."

>Lee stood up slowly, hands raised in the air. Amanda looked at him helplessly. She
suddenly had a very clear image of herself in "Dr. Pain's" class, being catapulted over his >head. She remembered that it was a situation just like this, with herself as the aggressor.
Taking a deep breath, she briefly closed her eyes, then executed the maneuver she had >been taught. Carrie went sailing over Amanda's head, landing flat on her back, the breath
knocked out of her. The gun had been jolted

from her hand when she hit the sidewalk.
>Lee quickly seized it and took aim at the disgruntled woman lying on the ground.
He looked at Amanda in amazement and smiled proudly, keeping the pistol pointed at
>Carrie. Amanda returned his smile shyly.

>Suddenly they were surrounded by agents with drawn weapons. Lee lowered his gun and
stepped aside as Carrie was hauled to her feet by Agency personnel. The wail of sirens
>split the air as Billy and Francine shouldered their way through the crowd that had
gathered.
>
Lee looked at his section chief in disgust. "Nice of you to make it, Billy," he snapped
>sarcastically. "You, too, Francine. I guess we'll just leave the two of you to clean this
up."
>
An ambulance and fire truck had arrived, dispersing some of the onlookers. Billy smiled
>calmly. "Now, Lee, you told me Massachusetts Avenue. There's more than one theater
on this street! It took a little fancy footwork to get here at all. Now, would you mind
>explaining to me what the hell happened here!" he ranted, his voice escalating.

>Lee smiled sheepishly and glanced over at Amanda where she stood talking quietly with
someone from the ambulance team. "Amanda found out that the connection between the
>Estoccian arms deals and Senator Hartford was his daughter, Carrie Stockton. She was
engaged to Amanda's ex-husband, apparently for the express purpose of acting as go-
>between." He ran a weary hand through his hair. "Somehow they tailed Amanda to the
office, I don't know. They probably attached some sort of an explosive homing device,
>with a switch that triggered that blast. We'll probably find an identical one on Joe's car.
When Amanda raced out of the office, they followed her here."
>
Billy grunted in agreement. "Thank goodness Joe was the only one near the car," Billy
>said belatedly. They watched the medics strap him to a stretcher, Amanda hovering over
him and holding his hand. As they closed the ambulance doors, she stood briefly with
>her fingertips pressed to her lips in anxiety, then turned and joined them on the sidewalk.

>Lee took her hands and gave them a gentle squeeze. She raised haunted eyes to his and
nodded slightly. She squared her shoulders and turned to face Billy. "Mr. Melrose, Sir,
>I'm going to take the boys and go to the hospital, just to make sure Joe's going to be
okay," she informed him quietly. "Can I borrow an agency car? Lee's is too small for the
>three of us, and..."

>Billy raised encouraging eyebrows. "Say no more, Amanda. I can get a ride back with
Lee," he assured her, dropping the keys into her hand. "Don't worry, Amanda, they'll
>take good care of him."

>"Thank you, Sir," she said gratefully. She touched her husband's shoulder lightly and
smiled warmly up at him. "I'll meet you back at the office later." Amanda took a deep,
>bracing breath and turned to locate Philip and Jamie.

>The boys were frightened and disbelieving of what they had witnessed. Lee could hear
her murmuring to them comfortingly as she herded them up out of the stairwell and to the
>car. He shook his head slightly at the irony of having his family exposed to a danger that
wasn't directly brought about by Agency

trouble. He shook off the last vestiges of panic
>and turned to his co-workers. "Francine, how did you get away from
Rhodes?" he asked
in amusement.
>
Billy chuckled, the sound building on itself until he nearly had
tears in his eyes. Lee
>smiled mischievously and took Francine's elbow lightly to direct her
to her Agency car.

>Francine was almost frothing at the mouth, muttering under breath.
"You two are worse
than the KGB. At least once their torture is
over, it's over, unlike with youâ€¦am I going
>to have to keep reliving this nightmare for the rest of my life?"
she griped as she settled
into the back seat of the car. Lee
could still hear her ranting after he shut the door. He
>grinned at Billy unrepentantly across the roof the car before
getting in the driver's seat.
Her grouching continued unabated
during the ride to the Agency, culminating in a final
>barb as they reached the parking lot. "I don't want to hear about
this ever again, do you
understand?" she asked fiercely. "I can
make both your lives a living hell, don't think that
>I won't!" she threatened, fleeing from the car as if pursued.

>Billy and Lee shared a conspiratorial grin as they entered the
Agency through the
Georgetown foyer. Billy sobered slightly,
laying a hand on Lee's shoulder. "Come down
>to my office after you've written your report," he said mildly.

>Lee nodded and took the stairs to the Q Bureau two at a time.

>End of chapter 10

5. Conclusion

Best Laid Plansâ€¦
>Chapter 11

>
Lee snapped his report shut and looked at this watch. It had
been several hours, and he
>was starting to worry about Amanda. Drumming his fingers on his desk
impatiently, he
lifted the phone and dialed Billy's office.

>
Before the section chief could answer, Lee dropped the receiver
back in its cradle and
>rubbed his hand over his eyes, sighing. She had said that she'd be
back this afternoon,
and he just had to trust that she would. He
knew it was silly, but he still couldn't get over
>the pangs of jealousy he felt whenever Amanda spent time with her
ex-husband. He
knew it had to do with the fact that no one was
aware of their relationship, and it left him
>a little on edge.

>Lee rose from his chair abruptly and grabbed his completed report.
Billy had wanted to
see it as soon as it was done, so he might as
well get it over with.
>

>
Entering Billy's office after a brief knock, Lee came face to
face with his wife. A
>familiar tingle of excitement shot through him, and he smiled, his
pleasure tempered
slightly with relief. "Hi," he said softly.

>
"Hi," Amanda echoed, gazing up at him with her heart in her
eyes.

>
Billy suddenly cleared his throat, intruding on the poignant moment. "Scarecrow," he
>began, "you'll be happy to know that our team has picked up Senator Hartford at his
estate, along with that last load of weapons he was hiding." He shook his head wryly. "It
>amazes me that these high society types can be caught red-handed and still refuse to
believe that they're in trouble. The guns were all there in the hayloft of one of the barns."
>
Lee chuckled lightly. "What about Carrie and her two thugs?" He touched a finger to his
>sore lip and caught Amanda's commiserating smile.
>Billy shuffled through a few papers on his desk. "Rogers and Barrett. Apparently they
were pretty small-time. We twisted Rogers' arm a little and he sang like a nightingale.
>They were supposed to help Carrie, but they had another agenda. The senator hired them
on as watchdogs, to make sure she didn't slip up. She was on their hit list if things hit the
>fan. Oh, and by the way," Billy beamed at Amanda, "I heard that you took Carrie out of
commission. Very nice work," he praised.

>
Amanda smiled shyly. "Thank you, sir." She leaned forward in her chair. "Sir, what will
>happen to Rhodes?"
>Lee and Billy exchanged a telling glance. "We'll give him a new identity and ship him
off somewhere," Billy replied. "Maybe it will keep him out of trouble."
>
Amanda switched her attention to Lee. "You said you'd tell me why Francine was so
>mad about having to watch him," she said inquiringly. Her puzzlement grew when the
two men started laughing. "What?" she asked, looking from one to the other in
>confusion.
>Lee looked imploringly over at Billy, who shook his head and put both hands in the air in
surrender. "No way, Lee. Not me. I value my skin too much," he chuckled.
>
"It goes back to that case I mentioned," Lee began reluctantly. "We thought we had
>Rhodes pinned down in a warehouse, and our team had surrounded the building.
Francine and I went in, and he surprised us." He touched the back of his head at the
>memory. "He whacked me with something, a board I think, and knocked me out for a
minute. When I came to, he and Francine were going at each other tooth and nail. I
>never saw her forget her training like that before," he grinned, smothering a laugh.
>Billy stood up and came around to lean on the desk. "She was screaming like a banshee,
trying to scratch his eyes out," he said, continuing the story. "Rhodes was pulling her
>hair and her blouse was half torn off. I think we would have helped her but we were all
just gawking in amazement. Francine NEVER loses control," he stated wryly.
>
"What happened?" Amanda asked, trying to curb a grin.
>
Lee continued with the anecdote. "I guess she remembered her training, because the next
>thing we knew the man was flat on his back and she had her gun pointed at him. Boy,
she was a mess. Her hair was sticking up all over, one shoe was missing, her shirt torn. I
>don't think she realized it at the time. Rhodes just looked up at her and started laughing,
and she snapped!" Lee shook his head in amused disbelief. "She shot him in the arm.

>Then she turned around and hobbled regally out to the car, ignoring the snickering and
the stares from the other agents. Needless to say, she is very sensitive about it."

>
The door flew open as Lee finished his sentence. Francine entered, a bright smile on her

>face. "Who's sensitive about what?" she asked curiously, looking at each of them in turn.
When no one would meet her gaze, her smile slowly slipped from her face, leaving a

>formidable expression. "Billy Melrose, you didn'tâ€¦" she hissed.

>Billy crossed his arms over his chest. "No, I didn't, Francine," he placated with a winning
smile.

>
Francine's expression lifted slightly, then she turned to Lee and took a menacing step

>forward. "Leeâ€¦"

>Lee grabbed Amanda's hand and pulled her to her feet. Avoiding Francine's murderous
gaze, he dragged Amanda past the irate woman and began spouting excuses. "Oh, yeah,

>well, Francine, we've gotta run, see you tomorrowâ€¦" he rushed, smiling fatuously in her
general direction. They cleared the door and hurried through the bullpen, trying to hold

>back their laughter.

>Francine charged through the door and opened her mouth to shout after them, but stopped
abruptly when she felt dozens of eyes on her. She smiled inanely at her coworkers and

>retreated into Billy's office, closing the door with a snap

>*****
Lee opened the door the Q Bureau and held it open for Amanda to precede him into the

>room. She turned to look at him over her shoulder, still chuckling at the story she had
just heard in Billy's office.

>
"I have to say, I've never seen that side of Francine before," she reflected gleefully,

>leaning back against her desk with her weight on her arms.

>Lee laughed ruefully as he came to stand before her. He slipped his hands around her
waist and settled her lightly against him. "I hope I never have to see it again," he said

>fervently.

>Amanda circled his shoulders with her arms and leaned back slightly.

"Billy told me that
we have this weekend off, including Friday.

"Want to try the Poconos again?" she asked.

>She ran her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck and he shivered slightly in
reaction.

>
"I'll make the calls," he volunteered, giving her a quick peck on the nose. He lifted his

>eyes to meet hers and cleared his throat. "How's Joe?" he asked gently, drawing his
hands more tightly around her.

>
"Oh, he's going to be fine," she reassured him. "He's got a nasty bump on the head, and

>quite a few bruises and scrapes, but he's okay. It's a miracle, really," she continued, "he
could have been killed."

>
Lee drew ran his hands down her arms to her hands and pulled back slightly. "You and

>the boys could have been killed, Amanda. It doesn't seem to matter whether it's Agency
business or not. I think it's time we told everyone about us," he said earnestly. "What do

>you think?"

>Amanda smiled softly. "You're right. Over the weekend, we can talk about how we're
going to break it to everyone. I think it's time

to take the 'mystery' out of our marriage."

>
End Chapter 11

>

>

>
Epilogue

>
The following Friday night, in a cabin in the Poconosâ€|

>

>Lee sat on the floor in front of the fireplace, leaning back against the couch. As his wife
snuggled up against his side, he turned his head slightly and pressed a kiss to her temple.

>She sighed contently and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. They watched lazily as
firelight painted shifting shadows along the walls.

>
Lee reflected on the crazy week they'd had. Wrapping up the mess from the past

>weekend had occupied almost all of his time, and running an avoidance pattern on
Francine had taken most of his energy. He was definitely not one her favorite people at

>the moment. He hadn't spent much time with Amanda; in fact they had just barely
missed each other at least a half dozen times.

Senator Hartford was being held pending

>further investigation, and his daughter, along with her cronies, was in jail for attempted
murder, as well as a host of other charges.

>
He had paid a visit to Ray Rhodes just before the FBI had taken him into the Witness

>Protection Program, and he was still struck by the man's remarks. He smiled slightly at
the memory, reliving the conversation in his head. "So, Lee, when are you going to come

>clean about you and Amanda?" Ray had needled. "I have to say, I'm not too impressed
with the caliber of agents you have working here, if no one's noticed the sparks."

>
Lee had looked away and cleared his throat uncomfortably before replying. "It's

>complicated, Ray," he muttered, trying to excuse himself.

>Ray had chuckled. "Life is complicated, Lee. The two of you should hold on to each
other for all you're worth. Two are always stronger than one," he said wisely, giving a

>wave as he was escorted down the hallway and out of sight.

>A shifting log in the fireplace brought Lee's attention back to the present. He turned
slightly and gazed at Amanda's profile in the flickering light, marveling at this woman

>who was his wife. He strengthened his resolve to convince her that they needed to reveal
their relationship to everyone. That was something they could talk about in the morning.

>
He remembered her determined rescue of her sons. "I've been meaning to tell you," he

>began, "that was some move you pulled on Carrie last weekend. I guess your self-
defense class is really paying off." His dimples appeared as she looked up at him in

>pleased surprise. "Good thing I didn't press my luck and try to stop you from going after
the boys, or you would have used that maneuver on me."

>
Amanda looked up at him coyly, her eyes twinkling. "I can think of other maneuvers I'd

>rather use on you, Mr. Stetson," she murmured with a smile. She pulled his head down to
hers and whispered in his ear.

>
"My, my, Mrs. Stetson," Lee chuckled huskily. She gasped in delighted surprise as he

>shifted his weight suddenly and rolled her to her back beside the
blazing fire. "You
certainly HAVE been paying attention!"

>
THE END
> <p><p>

End
file.